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OIL AND BLOOD MIX IN MIDDLE EAST



By Michael Harrington

Is American support of Israel's right to exist an act of imperialism, a united front of white power against the national liberation movement in the Middle East? Certainly not, but a number of student activists now hold this view.

Not too long ago — say before the Six Days War — such a question would have sounded preposterous. But Israel's military triumphs in that struggle deprived it of some of the sympathy it had received as an underdog; the understandable bitterness of American students over the tragic war in Vietnam led some to blame every evil in the world on Washington's intervention; and activists who were so isolated in their homeland that they could not change the course of events romanticized a distant, noble Third World which was to save them from their own irrelevance.

So these factors, and others, make it necessary to take that opening question seriously. I propose to try to answer it in a number of ways. First of all, the theory of imperialism which many Leftists use when they charge a plot between Washington and Tel-Aviv is open to serious question. Secondly, to the extent that theory does apply, the position of American imperialism is in favor of the Arabs, not the Israelis. And finally, the notion of a "third world" which somehow unites all of the non-whites into a militant mass is clearly contrary to the facts and reactionary and racist as well.

The Leftist theory of imperialism in all of its variants — in Hobson's British radical version, Lenin's amendment of it, Rosa Luxemburg's

analysis, and so on — does not merely assert that one nation tries to impose its will upon another. That has been going on ever since there were nation states and it hardly took the socialist movement, or any particular brilliance, to discover such an obvious phenomenon. What the Left said was that under conditions of advanced capitalism, imperialist expansion was an inherent, systematic tendency in society. Two main reasons were given for this charge: the falling rate of profit within the metropolitan country meant that business had to find new outlets for investment or else face an internal crisis which would drive the masses to overthrow the system; the capitalist economy required raw materials and food from the poor lands.

There is no point here in trying to decide how well this thesis applied to the past (I discussed the question at length in three chapters of *Toward a Democratic Left*, and Michael Barret Brown's *After Imperialism* is an excellent source). But how does it apply to the present?

Since the end of World War II, all the figures — including those published by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development which usually reflects the views of the new nations — indicate that the big powers are less dependent on their ex-colonies for raw materials and food. Synthetic substitutes for the products that used to be bought overseas, new technologies independent of those sources in any case, and a tremendous expansion of agricultural productivity has profoundly weakened the material dependence of capitalism on Asia, Africa and Latin America.

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There is one complicated, huge exception, to which we shall return: the empire of oil.

And secondly, with the emergency of neo-capitalism after 1945, i.e., a system planned and regulated for private profit in a way which would have shocked Adam Smith or, for that matter, a Republican in the Thirties, the extremes of the business cycle have been smoothed out. That hardly means that the millenium has arrived, for it is compatible with mass poverty in every "advanced" society and only a minority really enjoys affluence. But it has meant that the rich nations have found that they can make more money by exploiting each other's wealth rather than Third World hunger. And that is why the vast increase in overseas investment in this period has taken place among the big powers. Again, all the figures are quite convincing on this count.

Those who misunderstand this trend — I am thinking, for example, of Magdoff's Age of Imperialism or the Sweezy-Baran study of monopoly capitalism — do so by confusing two very different developments. Using the gross figures they demonstrate, quite accurately, that overseas investment is becoming more and more important for the United States; and then using specific figures about oil, they imply that these Third World projects are typical of the basic pattern. And they are, as I have suggested, really a powerful exception to the trend.

ISRAEL AND AMERICA

But if the classic Left theory of imperialism must be seriously amended, what does that have to do with the American relation with Israel?

Ironically this is one area in which there is a clear, imperialist interest for the United States: on the side of the Arab powers. For the largest, most politically powerful sector of American business which profits from the backwardness of Asia, Africa and Latin America is the oil industry. Indeed, if one would draw Marxist conclusions from the analysis made by Magdoff and Sweezy-Baran, they would suggest that, in terms of economic self-interest, this nation should oppose Israel.

And it is not exactly an accident that a Nixon Administration which took power after having made specific and generous promises to the captains of oil in Texas and elsewhere — candidate Nixon promised that he would oppose a reduction in the outrageous depletion allowance for oil billionaires — has also moved to be more "even-handed" in the Middle East. That is a diplomatic phrase meaning withdrawing at least some of American support for Israel's right to existance. Nor was it an accident in January, 1970, that the New York Times reported that Mr. Nixon was being encouraged by a group of powerful industrialists and bankers to be more friendly with the Arabs.

On this point one would do well to examine Secretary Rodger's proposal for peace in the Middle East. He has called upon Israel to withdraw from all the occupied territories in return for guarantees — like the worthless ones given in the Fifties — that the Arab powers will respect the Israeli right to live. There are many fascinating aspects to this policy but one is of particular relevance in this discussion.

Committed defenders of Israel's right to exist — and of the need for American support of that right — are not necessarily the unthinking champions of everything Israel has done. There is, for that matter, a healthy diversity among those of us who join now in demanding that the United States honor its pledges to Israel. I opposed Israel's joining with Britain and France in the war in the Fifties; I was against Israeli support for French colonialism in Tunisia, Morocco and Algeria; and I believe that the Palestinian refugee question was wrongly treated on all sides (the Arabs wanted that sore to fester; the Israelis did not do enough to alleviate it). But it is precisely because I am an independent advocate for Israel at the present moment that I found Washington's recent proposals imperialist — pro-Arab imperialism, that is.



"I'm trying to be even-handed."

For the Palestinians to whom the guerrilla leaders appeal have real grievances. And there do seem to be some very real tendencies toward the creation of a Palestinian Arab state on the West Bank. If that project could be separated from the vicious anti-Israelism — and anti-Semitism — which now accompanies it, it might provide the

basis for a long term resolution of a fundamental problem. An Arab state side by side with a Jewish state — eventually perhaps a federation — might provide a model of cooperation between the two nationalities which would deliver food, social services and health to the Arab masses involvel, rather than anti-Israel slogans.

But on that question the Secretary of State does not concern himself with the Palestinians but proposes to return the territories to their previous "owners," i.e., a Nasserite Egypt which has consistently manipulated the refugee issue for his own political advantage and a Jordan which was the artificial creation of British imperialism after World War I. It is in keeping with the curious fact that the most reactionary, feudalist Arab state, a most vociferous and violent proponent of a Holy War, is Saudi Arabia, the Middle Eastern country with the deepest political and economic ties to the American (and world) empire of oil.

The American policy makes sense as part of a deal with Arab rulers, but it opposes, as do so many of the existing Arab states, genuine self-determination, and it leads away from the only real solution: a peace negotiated between Israel and the Arabs themselves; a permanent settlement of the Palestinian refugee issue; and co-operation between Israel and its neighbors to meet the desperate needs of the Arab masses.

FRANCE

And finally, in terms of applying the theory of imperialism to the Middle East, how does one account for the French role as friend of the Arabs in 1970?

Here is a nation which relinquished its colonial possessions with greater reluctance and more blood than any other European state (with the possible exception of Portugal). It fought the national liberation movements of North Africa and Indo-China; and the war it could not win in Vietnam was passed on to the United States in 1954. Here it a government which won in an election based on slogans of law and order and insinuations of a Communist plot (even though the French Communist Party had been as surprised, and upset, as De Gaulle by the upheavals of May, 1968). And in January, 1970, it reveals that it is selling more than 110 Mirage planes to Libya.

With a population of 1,900,000, Libya would have more air-power per capita than any nation in the world if this deal goes through: one Mirage for every 19,000 citizens as compared to a ratio of one to 130,000 in France itself. But more to the point, those planes are extremely sophisticated. The Mirage E-III is an interceptor and attack bomber, equipped with navigational computers and radar and capable of flying at a low altitude in all weather. To learn to fly it takes 4 years, to service the entire fleet which the French

are going to deliver requires 150 to 200 pilots, 1,500 technicians and 5,000 other specialists. And Libya, currently, has an air force of ten American planes.

It the Libyans are not simply going to turn this hardware over to the Egyptians, a ranking French military leader quoted in L'Express commented that all this preparation would require "a veritable enterprise of military and industrial colonization in Africa." That is a curious way of carrying out the anti-imperialist struggle.



OSRIN In The Cleveland Plain Dealer

"Ah-h-h, Libya 1970."

So the imperialism thesis becomes preposterous particularly when it is applied to Israel. In theory and in fact to the extent that America is imperialistic, its interests are pro-Arab and that is precisely how U.S. oil tycoons have understood them. And meanwhile, the French imperialists are competing with the Russian imperialists for the affection of Arab rulers, be they feudalists, ex-satelites of the British or "progressives." All of these conspiracies and maneuvers might even be amusing to contemplate were it not for the fact that they threaten the right to life itself of a nation created after its people had been subjected to the most monstrous genocide in the history of mankind.

But still isn't it true, as Black Panthers and some white radicals tell us, that this is a struggle of whites against non-whites and that Leftist must side with the latter?

The notion of the "third World" is a convenient short-hand for designating the new nations. But if it is taken to imply the racist proposition that all non-whites are, by virtue of their skin color, unified and of a like mind and therefore always worthy of support, it is an extremely reactionary proposition. The cruel war between Nigeria and Biafra shows how it is impossible to apply such a color line. So does the widespread hostility to Indians in Africa and to the overseas Chinese in the Pacific nations. (In those areas, the Indians and Chinese have often played the merchant role which Medieval Christianity, seeking to evade its own doctrines on money, forced upon the Jews. In a sense the Indians and Chinese are being victimized according to the rites of an "anti-Semitism" directed by non-whites against non-whites who are not Jews.)

But then one does not need to range around the world for examples of the murderous conflicts within the ex-colonial lands. The Middle East supplies apt cases in point all on its own. In two countries, the Sudan and the Chad, there are presently armed struggles between Arabs and black Africans. And in Iraq there has been a cruel campaign in the name of Arab nationalism against the ethnic minority of the Kurds. Indeed, it is this last point which makes every thinking person suspect the claims of the Palestinian guerrilla organizations that they want to live at peace with the Jews when they take over Israel.

More generally the "Third Worldist" approach to the Middle East conceals social conflicts and class needs and hostilities behind a vague phrase with possible racist implications. For isn't it clear that the Arab masses need an end to the Balkanization and feudal principalities imposed upon the area by the lords of oil? And that means that the Saudis are not to be supported simply because they are Arabs but rather should be opposed precisely because they frustrate the hope of satisfying the genuine needs of the Arab people.

And if one takes this view of identifying with the genuine aspirations of the Arabs in the Middle East then the notion of a democratic peace becomes all the more compelling. For if the Israelis and the Arabs were to negotiate their own settlement rather than having one imposed upon them by the manipulators in Washington, Moscow and Paris, and if, above all, Israel could work with the Palestinian Arabs and help them in the creation of their own state, that would actually serve the needs of the overwhelming majority of the people of the areas, Jews and Arabs alike.

In that perspective, in demanding that the United States support Israel's right to exist, I am not taking an "anti-Arab" position, but looking toward the only program which can promote the liberation of all the people of the Middle East.

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The Youth Committee for Peace and Democracy in the Middle East is an ad hoc student coalition dedicated to rallying sentiment on the nation's campuses for a just and lasting peace in the Middle East.

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